

# PLOT—WHAT CHARACTERS DO AND WHY

## The 8-Point Plotting Method

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A writer can start a book by first developing the characters or by first developing the plot. Either way is a valid entry point to the story. When beginning plotting, however, these following elements must be taken into account.

1. Setting
2. Characters
3. Goals
4. Obstacles to the Goals (conflict)
5. Motivation (reason for trying)

A novel can also contain a theme or moral, but use a light touch. Avoid preaching.

Begin with the story problem (question), which includes:

1. What the character(s) wants to achieve.
2. What the character stands to gain.
3. What stands in the way.
4. The consequences of failing.

With your character's goal and the obstacles to achieving it in mind, begin plotting. You want to plug in a brief description of a scene containing action in these spots. Complex motivation and intense detail can be filled in later, once you've completed this skeleton outline.

### Bare Bones of Plotting

1. Inciting incident: Sets the tone for the book and defines the story question. It contains setting, at least one of the characters (usually), and ends with a clear-cut problem that the reader wonders how the protagonist will solve.
2. Escalating troubles: The character takes steps to overcome the problem, but each attempt makes the situation worse, until he finally tries something that he falsely believes has solved the problem. You can plug in one to three scenes here, depending on the length of the book, but three usually work best. These scenes lead up to the point of no return and major crisis, and events will include: .
  - A. Point of No Return: Your character has now invested so much into the goal that there is no turning back — to do so risks major loss of property, relationships, even of life. The character is now committed until the end.
  - B. Small Successes: Or even a major one that will later be reversed or turn out not to be what it seemed.
3. Resting Point: The characters successes let him take a breather. In mysteries and thrillers this is often when characters believe they've caught, killed or identified the villain. In romance, the characters believe they've overcome the obstacles to love.
4. Major Crisis: But something is held back from some, if not all, characters and very often also from the reader. When this information surfaces, all illusion of success is shattered. The character now realizes the problem hasn't been solved, and this last crisis convinces him it can't be. This leads to despair.

5. The Black Moment: Characters believe that all is lost. This can be a period of story review and high angst and if properly done leaves the reader wondering if the character(s) will ever prevail.
6. Turnaround: Something occurs that causes the protagonist(s) to see a solution. This must be something that is caused by an external event, not just a result of the character's thinking process. A new decision is made.
7. Climax: The character acts on the decision and either succeeds or fails to achieve the goal.
8. Denouement:: Shows character(s) receiving the appropriate rewards or punishments. Remaining loose ends are also tied up, but many should have already been resolved during the major crisis through climax scenes.

The trick to plotting is creating incidents that demonstrate the ideas you want each step to convey. The incident must include character, goal, motivation (if only implied) and most important, conflict (obstacle to goal). These scenes are considered plot points because the plot will not move without them.

Example: If your outline states only that Sara loses Jim's love, you've haven't defined an action. You need something like: *Angry that Sara failed to tell him her parents would be at the gathering and did not approve of him, Jim broke their engagement and walked out on her.*

Once you have the basic bones begin filling in more details of characterization, motivation and consequences. Never forget that characters drive the plot through their decisions and actions. Make sure secondary characters have a vital role in the plot. The sidekick whose only job is to give the hero someone to bounce his ideas off is not enough. Give this person another role, perhaps that of unwitting betrayer. If not kill him off or eliminate him.

That inciting incident must be an action scene. Buildings don't have to explode, but a problem very serious to the protagonist(s) must be outlined as an action scene. No backstory allowed.

The escalating troubles must build on one another. The character applies for a dream job. First complication is the bus breaks down and she must reschedule the interview. During the reschedule telephone call, the interviewer makes a racist comment that the character cannot abide. She objects and while the interviewer does reschedule the appointment, the character knows she won't get a fair outcome. What does she do next? Each decision makes things worse until she reaches small successes.

The final crisis must believably derail the character's chance of succeeding. Not only must the character believe this, the reader must believe the character. It's okay for the reader to know that the pot of gold is just over the next rise in the road, but they must be convinced the character doesn't think so.

The turnaround scene must be triggered by an outside event that gives the character a shift in perspective. The character can't just look in the mirror, think "I've been such a fool," then make the change. Although this kind of turnaround has been seen in some books, it always makes the reader feel cheated.

Keep in mind, plot equals character and character equals plot. In other words, although the character makes the decisions, you must decide what those decisions will be and how the actions will play out. This is plot. Without it, the characters cannot demonstrate the full depth of their abilities.